

# Jerusalem Perspective

A Monthly Report on Research into the Words of Jesus

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## Zechariah's Prestigious Task

by Shmuel Safrai

*This is the second of a series of articles examining the Lukan account of John the Baptist and Jesus in the light of Jewish literature.*

... he [Zechariah] was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the LORD's sanctuary to burn incense. When the time of the offering of the incense came, the assembled worshipers were outside praying. And there appeared to him an angel of the LORD standing on the right side of the altar of incense. (Luke 1:9-11)

**A**t the beginning of the first century, around the time when John the Baptist and Jesus were born, hundreds of priests probably came to Jerusalem each week with their division to serve in the Temple. The priests busied themselves with the offering of sacrifices, as well as with the various tasks of purification such as for lepers who had been cured or for Nazirites who had finished their prescribed periods of consecration. All of this was in accordance with the rites described in the Written and Oral Torah.

However, the offering of the *tamid* (the daily community sacrifices, cf. Numbers 28:3-4; Exodus 29:38-43) each morning and afternoon required the services of only a small number of priests. Participation in these sacrifices, therefore, was determined by lottery: "The

superintendent said to them: 'Come and cast lots'" (Tamid 3:1). Participating in the burning of the incense, which came at the conclusion of the sacrifices, was considered an especially prestigious task for a priest. In fact, a priest who had won this honor once could never be included in future lotteries: "[The superintendent] said to them: 'You who are new to the rites of incense, come and cast lots'" (Tamid 5:2).

### Burning Incense

Most of the daily tasks of the priests in the Temple were not undertaken in the sanctuary itself, but in the Temple courtyard. The sacrificial altar, for example, was in the Temple courtyard. The Levites sang the Psalms there and the priests blessed the people from the steps that led to the sanctuary. Only the kindling of the lamps of the golden menorah and the burning of incense were carried out within the sanctuary.

The incense was burned upon a small golden altar in the center of the sanctuary. The Mishnah provides many details regarding the offering of the incense. The priest who was to offer the incense was accompanied by fellow priests to the top of the steps leading from the Temple court-

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## How the Gospel Writers Worked

by Robert L. Lindsey

**T**he basic literary method used in the synoptic Gospels was to string together a series of stories about Jesus. It is the same literary method followed in the Hebrew narratives of the Old Testament, although modern scholars often deny this and insist that the Gospel form is unique. However

the similarity of narrative technique between the Old Testament and the synoptic Gospels is clearly apparent.

### Hebrew Narrative

The Gospels present a chronological progression from the birth or appearance of Jesus until his death

*(Continued on page 2)*



### ***How Gospel Writers Worked*** (continued from page 1)

and resurrection. This is typical of Hebrew narrative biography. If there are occasional remarks inserted by the authors to explain a word or phrase, it is done inconspicuously. Indeed, the Hebrew narrative form imposed special limitations on the writers of the Gospels when they wished to add comments of their own.

As in the Old Testament, the synoptic Gospels use laconic expressions of time and place in story openings. For example one reads about Elijah, "And he got up and went to Zarephath" (I Kings 17:10), and likewise about Jesus that "he got up...and went to a desert place" (Mark 1:35).

Following Hebraic custom, few adjectives and adverbs are used, and direct conversation is the rule. Hebrew idioms abound, and the juxtaposition of nouns such as "furnace [of] fire," "storm [of] wind," "birds [of] the sky," "lilies [of] the field," "poor [of] spirit" and "Kingdom [of] Heaven" also is reminiscent of the Hebrew Bible.

## **Interdependence**

One of the interesting things about the synoptic Gospels is their interdependence. Although there are many differences, there also are

many striking similarities.

For example, when Matthew, Mark and Luke recounted Jesus' response to the rich man (Mt. 19:23, Mk. 10:23, Lk. 18:24), they all agreed on the use of the word *δυσκόλως* (*dus-KO-los*, "hardly, with difficulty"), a word that is never used elsewhere in the New Testament. Similarly, in the story of the paralyzed man (Mt. 9:6, Mk. 2:10, Lk. 5:24), each of the synoptists divided Jesus' discourse at exactly the same place with the phrase "he said to the paralytic."

This interconnectedness also can be seen in the order of story units. Matthew, Mark and Luke have seventy-eight story units in common (for instance the Rich Young Ruler story, Mt. 19:16-30 = Mk. 10:17-31 = Lk. 18:18-30). Scholars refer to this material as the "Triple Tradition." Fifty-nine of these units are in the same order in all three Gospels.

On the other hand, Matthew and Luke share forty-two story units, known as the "Double Tradition," which are not found in Mark (for instance the Parable of the Talents, Mt. 25:14-30 = Lk. 19:11-27). Yet except for one story (Mt. 3:7-10 = Lk. 3:7-9) which comes at the beginning of their Gospels, Matthew and Luke never agree to place stories that are unique to their Gospels in the same order.

In Triple Tradition, Matthew and Luke only have approximately twenty-five per cent agreement in wording — in the seventy-eight story units shared with Mark, the wording of Matthew and Luke is rarely the same for more than a few words. However, in Double Tradition Matthew and Luke have approximately sixty per cent agreement in wording — in the forty-two story units not shared with Mark, the wording of Matthew and Luke often is exactly the same for whole sentences and even paragraphs.

I have called this correlation —

high verbal identity but low story-order agreement in Double Tradition, and low verbal identity but high story-order agreement in Triple Tradition — the "Markan Cross-Factor" because apparently it is the presence of Mark which distinguishes Triple Tradition from Double Tradition. Mark somehow stands between Matthew and Luke, causing much of the agreement and disagreement of story-order and wording found in the synoptic Gospels.

## **Who Wrote First?**

Scholars have not agreed on which Gospel was written first, although some clues are available. It happens that Mark used quite a few words repeatedly. For example, he often used the expression "and immediately." He said that Jesus, at his baptism, "immediately" saw the heavens opened (Mk. 1:10), after which the Spirit "immediately" drove Jesus into the desert. Mark used this expression over forty times. Along with words like "again" and often, Mark's love of the expression "and immediately" shows a writer who enjoyed frequently repeating his favorite words and phrases.

Matthew's Gospel generally shares these Markan expressions, usually in exactly the same context in which Mark uses them. Luke, however, wrote as if he had never seen Mark's special words. This may indicate that Luke wrote before Mark, and that Matthew wrote after Mark.

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### ***Jerusalem Perspective***

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**A**lthough the literal English translation of *vav* is “and,” it leads a more varied life than its English counterpart. While “and” can mean “also,” or can be used like a comma to connect words, phrases and sentences, *vav* can do the work of “but,” “or,” “so,” “then,” “with,” “when,” “who,” “that,” “on the contrary” and much more. Hebrew frequently uses a *vav* where in English no word would be used at all, and in such cases the best translation is simply to drop the “and” entirely.

## Many Senses

The following examples show that in many instances the real meaning of *vav* is obscured when translated simply as “and.” In each pair of examples, the first illustrates a particular usage of *vav* in the Old Testament, and the second shows the same Hebraic usage in a Gospel context. We have added the examples from the Gospels because, as we mentioned in the last lesson, one frequently finds distinct traces of the Semitic use of *vav* in the synoptic Gospels.

### ♦ “And” in the sense of “but”:

For all the gods of the nations are mere idols, **and** the LORD made the heavens. (Psalm 96:5)

The winds blew, **and** beat upon that house, **and** it did not fall. (Matthew 7:25)

### ♦ “And” in the sense of “or”:

Anyone who kidnaps a man, **and** he has sold him **and** he is still holding him [i.e., whether he has sold him or is still holding him], shall be put to death. (Exodus 21:16)

Anyone who breaks one of these “light” commandments, **and** teaches others to do the same will be called “light” in the Kingdom of Heaven. (Matthew 5:19)

### ♦ “And” in the sense of “then”:

By the twenty-seventh day of the second month, the earth was dry. **And** God said to Noah: “Come out of the ark....” (Genesis 8:14-15)

When the LORD saw her, he had compassion on her, **and** said to her,

# Hebrew Nuggets

“Don’t cry.” **And** he went up and touched the bier. (Luke 7:13-14)

### ♦ “And” in the sense of “when”:

**And** they and their father saw their money-bags, they were afraid. (Genesis 42:35)

## Lesson Eighteen

### 1 — VAV (part 2)

*In our previous lesson we focused on vav’s primary meaning of “and.” However, as we will see in this lesson, “and” is not always the correct translation of this Hebrew word. vav often is used to convey other meanings.*

How can you say to your brother, “Let me take the splinter out of your eye,” **and** there is a rafter in your own eye? (Matthew 7:4)

### ♦ “And” is sometimes used as a comma, a dash or parentheses to set off an explanatory aside:

That evening an old man came home from his work in the fields outside the town **and** the man was from the hill country of Ephraim and resided at Gibeah where the townspeople were Benjaminites. (Judges 19:16)

As he approached the gate of the town, a dead man was being carried out, the only son of his mother **and** she was a widow **and** a large crowd from the town was with her. (Luke 7:12)

### ♦ Often the best translation of *vav* is to omit it completely:

On the third day **and** Abraham looked up and saw the place in the distance. (Genesis 22:4)

**And** when the day of the circumcision ceremony came **and** his name was called Jesus. (Luke 2:21)

These examples show that to mechanically translate “and” in every passage can be as inaccurate in the New Testament as in the

Hebrew Scriptures. Old Testament scholars and translators are well aware of the many idiomatic usages of *vav*, but New Testament translators have only begun to examine the “ands” of the Gospels for the possibility of such Hebraic nuances. Because the Gospels are heavily influenced by Hebraic thought and expressions, an English translation which does not take that into account will always fall short.

## Reading Practice

• **וְ** (*vav*). As we mentioned previously, this is the Hebrew word for “hook.” It is also the name of the sixth letter of the Hebrew alphabet.

• **הֶעָבִיר** (*va-HEV*), a place in trans-Jordan close to the Arnon (Numbers 21:14).

• **וְיָדָה** (*ve-yo-LAH*), “viola.” Notice the *ho-LAM* following the *yod*.  
• **וָלוּאָה** (*la-VAH*), “he borrowed.”  
• **וְשָׂא** (*she-VA*), the name of the vowel symbol (“e” in our transliterations) represented by two dots one above the other. It was introduced in Lesson Ten.

• **וְשָׂא** (*sha-VAH*), “he (or it) was identical with, equal to.”

• **וְשָׂא** (*sha-VA*), “he cried out (in distress).” The final letter is ‘A-yin. As we stated in Lesson Four, ‘A-yin can be considered a silent letter.

• **וְרָא** (*ra-VAH*), “he drank until his thirst was quenched.”

• **וְרָא** (*re-va-YAH*), “saturation, fill, fullness.”

• **וְשָׂא** (*a-VAH*), “he sinned.” This Hebrew root is one of several denoting “sin.”

• **וְנָא** (*na-VAH*), “it was lovely, beautiful.” Related to this verb is the feminine personal name, **נָאָה** (*na-VAH*), which is very common today in Israel.

• **וְשָׁלֵו** (*sha-LEV*), an adjective meaning “tranquil, peaceful.” Its feminine form is **וְשָׁלֵוָה** (*she-le-VAH*).

*In Lesson Nineteen we will begin studying the elements of the word Israel — יִשְׂרָאֵל.*



# Hebrew Reconstruction of the Lord's Prayer

As a summary of Dr. Bradford Young's eight-part series on the rabbinic background to the Lord's Prayer, we present his Hebrew reconstruction, with transliteration and English translation.

אָבִינוּ שְׁבָשְׁמִים	'a-VI-nu she-ba-sha-MA-yim
יִתְקַדֵּשׁ שִׁמְךָ	yit-ka-DESH shim-KA
תַּמְלִיד מַלְכוּתְךָ	tam-LIK mal-kut-KA
יַעֲשֶׂה רְצוֹנְךָ בְּשָׁמַיִם וּבָאָרֶץ	ye-'a-SEH re-tson-KA ba-sha-MA-yim u-va-'A-rets
אֵת לֶחֶם חֲסֵנוּ תֵּן לָנוּ הַיּוֹם	'et LE-hem hu-KE-nu ten LA-nu ha-YOM
וּמַחֲל לָנוּ עַל חַוְבוֹתֵינוּ כְּשֶׁמַּחֲלָנוּ	u-me-HAL LA-nu 'al ho-vo-TE-nu ke-she-ma-HAL-nu
אֶף אֲנִי לְחַיְבֵינוּ	'af 'A-nu le-ha-ya-VE-nu
וְאַל תְּבִיאֵנוּ לִידֵי נִסְיוֹן אֶלָּא	ve-'AL te-vi-'E-nu li-DE ni-sa-YON 'e-LA'
תַּצִּילֵנוּ מִן הָרָע	ta-tsi-LE-nu min ha-RA'

*Our father who is in heaven, may your name be sanctified, may you continue establishing your kingship, may your will be accomplished in heaven and on earth. Give us today the food that is necessary to sustain us. Forgive us for our sins just as we also have forgiven those who have sinned against us. Do not place us in a trial [that would be more than we could withstand], but help us overcome our inclination to evil.*

## Zechariah's Prestigious Task (continued from page 1)

yard to the sanctuary. He entered the sanctuary alone, the other priests descending the steps to wait with the crowd assembled in the courtyard: "When all had gone he offered the incense, prostrated himself [in adoration] and went out [of the sanctuary]" (Tamid 6:3).

## A Vision

It was not unknown for a priest to see a vision or hear a heavenly voice in the sanctuary at the time of the incense offering. Josephus relates that while the High Priest and ruler John Hyrcanus was offering incense in the sanctuary, he heard a voice proclaiming that his sons had just defeated the Syrian king Antiochus (*Antiquities* 13:282).

Another heavenly voice that was heard at the incense burning announced the murder of Roman Emperor Gaius Caligula. Because of his death, Caligula's decree that his statue be erected in the Jerusalem Temple was cancelled (Tosefta Sotah 13:6).

The most striking example of a vision at the incense offering is that of Shim'on the Just, a high priest and

the earliest (circa 200 B.C.E.) sage known in rabbinic literature:

Shim'on the Just served Israel as High Priest for forty years. In his last year he said to them: "This year I will die." They said to him: "How do you know this?" He said to them: "Each year [on the Day of Atonement] when I entered the Holy of Holies [to offer incense] an old man dressed in white would enter with me and leave with me. This year, he entered with me but did not leave with me." (Yoma 42<sup>9</sup>)

## Morning & Afternoon

The burning of the incense was considered the climax of all the activities connected with the *tamid*. As we noted, the priest offering the incense entered the sanctuary alone. A great crowd, made up of those who had brought sacrifices to the Temple, as well as of interested spectators, awaited him in the Temple courtyard. When he left the sanctuary, he stood on the steps leading to the courtyard, together with some of the other priests, and blessed the assembled crowd.

The incense offered at the afternoon *tamid* was considered to be of greater importance than that offered at the morning service: "The golden altar is dedicated only by the incense

of spices [offered in the afternoon]" (Menahot 4:4). In other words, if a break occurred in the Temple worship, for instance such as that during the persecution accompanying the decrees of Antiochus IV, the worship was restarted with the afternoon service rather than the morning service.

A number of sources also mention the prayers of people outside of Jerusalem at the time when the afternoon incense was being offered in the Temple, for example Judith's supplication in her hometown of Bethulia for deliverance from a besieging army (Judith 9:1).

Luke does not state whether the vision of Zechariah took place during the morning or afternoon incense burning ceremony. However, since the burning of the afternoon incense was the more important, it would seem that all the visions mentioned above, including that of Zechariah, occurred at the afternoon ceremony.

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